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AUTHOR Holleman, I. Thomas, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a variety of ways school officials can effectively utilize participation by lay citizens in school affairs to maintain good public relations with the community. The important role of parents is stressed, and the value of homework assignments, teacher-parent group meetings, and individual teacher-parent conferences in developing school-parent relations is discussed. The author also examines ways of dealing with various community groups that are actively concerned with school affairs, often because of their dissatisfaction with some phase of the school program. The final section of the paper describes ways that parents can be utilized within the school setting to enrich students' educational opportunities and improve communications between the school and community. In particular, the author discusses the possibility of using parents as volunteer teacher aides, substitute teachers, in-class resource people for certain subject areas, members of curriculum development committees, participants in various extracurricular activities, and consultants for planning or improving the school plant and its physical facilities. (JG)

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THE INFORMAL USE OF PARENTS IN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS

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I. Thomas Holleman, Jr.

By far the greater amount of participation in school affairs is on an informal basis. This type of participation is by definition unstructured but, nevertheless, often quite effective in altering school plans and policies. It is sometimes frank and open and at other times cloaked in secrecy. Leadership of such participation is in some cases easily identified; in others, indistinguishable. In whatever form it may take, it should be a matter of direct concern to school officials and community leaders. It is the effective utilization of such informal participation by lay citizens in school affairs that this paper is concerned. Since a public school has so many 'publics' the scope of this paper shall be limited to parents for the sake of distinction.

THE HOME SETTING

Of the school's publics, parents are both the most difficult and the easiest to please. They are the easiest because the school's interest in their children is the ultimate compliment. They are the most difficult because their past experience has fixed what they think school should be. (10:20) Parents, like everyone else, will evaluate the school

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in the light of their special interests and needs. Since these needs will primarily be 'child centered' the parents' P R potential shall first be considered in the setting of the home.

Pupils are P R

Each pupil is a daily reporter on his school. If the school day goes well and the teacher and principal are helpful and jovial, the report is favorable. If lessons are not learned, or if the teacher reflects harassment, or if the pupil fails to recognize the sequence or purpose of the work done, the report at home may not be so favorable.

The child is usually the main source of information that is transmitted to the parents. It is primarily this information that the parent uses in reaching conclusions about the local school system because most parents trust the stories of their offspring. No one else goes into the home as a school representative more often, and no one is listened to with greater interest and credulity than the child. (11:21) It therefore follows that perhaps the greatest P R channel is the flow from teacher to pupil to parent.

Homework: A P R Tool

Strangely enough, and very few stop to consider it, homework has a great effect upon school-home P R. It can either have a positive, neutral, or, as in most cases, a negative effect upon good relations. As most teachers know,

homework assignments for Johnny usually wind up being collectively parent-child assignments in that order. The point is, the entire home is involved in homework; so why not use homework as an instrument of P R?

A new emphasis needs to be placed on the improvement of assignments. Consider what happens to parents' attitudes when a pupil toils over homework given solely for disciplinary purposes. A particularly heavy strain is put upon parental goodwill when home assignments require an abnormally long time for completion, have no recognizable purpose, assume that the pupils will have the assistance of well-educated parents, and compete with major school and community events. And then there is the father who hopefully inquires about the 'gem' which he and his son had done together. "Oh that? Why Dad, the teacher didn't even read it." (11:21)

Every assignment gives parents a picture of the school. It can be an uninteresting or a vivid picture. Fortunately during the last few years the picture has changed for the better, as teachers have studied the homework problem with greater intensity. It is believed that the homework assignments that make the greatest impression on parents are those that enlist them as participants and co-teachers (11: 33-34) Many parents are pleased when their children seek their opinions on topics to be discussed in class. And the children when they quote their dads and find that serious consideration is given to their ideas acquire a new perspective on the importance of their parents' views.

Evidentally, the "biggest continuing contact between the school and the home is the homework assignment." (8:14)

Teacher-Parent Home Seminars

Periodic home meetings between small groups of teachers and parents have been found to be an effective P R tool. These meetings are not called to discuss individual children, but to stimulate a free exchange of ideas between teachers and parents and to establish a personal relationship.

In these meetings, parents who are willing to use their homes for seminars, or to attend meetings in the homes of other parents, volunteer to do so. The program operates on a grade basis, the purpose being to get teachers and parents of the same grades together. (2:95-97)

Teacher-Parent Conferences on Grading

Teacher-parent conferences remain one of the most effective ways of preventing problems with parents. Some educators have even recommended that such conferences be used to replace the report card, or at least supplement it. (12:24-25)

In the Palo Alto Unified School District, Palo Alto, California, teacher-parent conferences have been used to report to parents since 1947. These conferences are scheduled approximately one week after the pupil receives his report card. According to Dr. Andrew Stephens, Assistant Superintendent of the Palo Alto Schools, such conferences offer a number of advantages:

1. Face-to-face contact provides a two-way channel of information; misunderstandings can be removed and a positive relationship established.
2. The child is not called upon to interpret the curriculum.
3. The teacher can show actual work samples, interpret test results, and explain materials used in instruction.
4. The child benefits from the increased understanding of both parents and teacher.
5. The teacher benefits by learning more about the child -- his interests, activities, behavior, and background.
6. The parents are able to understand the school's principles and objectives. (12:25)

THE NEIGHBORHOOD SETTING

Various types of informal groups of parents may be found in the neighborhood setting. They are groups that came together spontaneously because of some common need or natural relationship as found in the community. These groups can many times provide headaches for the school administration if a poor public relations program is not instilling confidence in the neighborhood regarding the school, its programs and officials.

The Community Group

The most common form of informal organizational participation is represented by the community group, often composed largely of parents, which is independently initiated to work for a change in the school's purposes, policies, program, or personnel. Such groups usually are established as a result of dissatisfaction with some phase of the school program on the part of a number of people. If there is no way provided for an expression of this dissatisfaction or the way or ways provided are considered inadequate or ineffectual, the formation of such a group follows naturally. The fact that members often do not have a knowledge of the total school program does not deter them from pressing their case.

For the most part such organizations are essentially pressure groups. They are interested in the school even though their interests may be narrow and out of all proportion. The school administrator and the board of education may find themselves in the position of opposing the efforts of some of these groups even though they may sympathize with the organizational objectives. This is the case because often other parts of the school program have priority on the money and effort of the school officials. Informal groups seeking to dictate teaching methods are almost always sincere in their beliefs, but this does not make the task of the administrator any easier for he must reserve the right as a professional to determine his own methods within the framework

of his jurisdiction.

The most undesirable of these groups is probably the kind which is organized to 'get' the superintendent, the principal, or one or more teachers. In some cases the objective is openly stated and members solicited on this basis; in other cases the objective of dictating personnel practices is thinly veiled by designating the group the 'School Improvement Association' or some similar title. Whether open or disguised, such groups are highly disruptive of school-community relations, to say nothing of their effect on the morale of school people. (13)

Very often groups with negative objectives have resulted from the omission of positive steps which might have preceded their formation. When such groups do appear, school administrators should take an 'inward look' to determine the cause or causes. At the first recognition of the symptoms, professional remedies should be sought and administered with all the finesse within the expertise of the professional educator. This, in itself, is a challenge to the two-way communicative process. The result of 'soft-sell' action at this juncture may explain the situations which are misunderstood -- or which actually need correction. One must have an open mind.

Often these groups will either change directions or dissolve and individuals will join action groups to assist in a positive way. If such an adventure is successful, the administrator should resolve to improve the total program of relations with his 'citizen public.'

The School Caucus

Another kind of informal organization, the school caucus, concerns itself with the selection of candidates for the school board and the subsequent board election. It is a very informal group but one which may have a decided impact on the school system. Candidates for the board often appear before the caucus to state their positions on school policies and issues. The caucus may endorse a declared candidate or it may decide to select a candidate of its own and campaign for his election. In a number of communities the endorsement of the caucus is tantamount to election. Organized support of board candidates does not always take the form of a caucus but may be just as effective when extended by interested groups meeting in private homes. Informal coffee hours may be arranged by friends of candidates to promote their chances for election. Sometimes candidates are supported because of their personal qualifications and sometimes because they are known to favor or oppose certain school policies or practices. (13)

The Family Clan

The 'family clan' is another powerful informal group which participates in school affairs in many ways. The family clan, consisting of brothers, sisters-in-law, uncles, nephews, and nieces, is often quite large. In the older, rural communities it is often closely knit and quite powerful in

community affairs. The clan usually convenes for Sunday dinner, and much of the day is spent in discussing local affairs as well as state and national politics. Attitudes toward the school and action proposals are often developed at these family gatherings. In some cases official family positions toward school consolidation or school bond issues are taken at the annual family reunion. (13)

THE SCHOOL SETTING

Parents play a very important role in better communication between home and school. As members of the community they are in contact with other parents and students in neighborhood and larger community activities. They have opportunities to know at first hand, as few teachers do, about students' families, circumstances, activities, interests, needs, problems, hopes, and aspirations. Their work for the school can help lead students toward a productive school experience in ways that supplement and vitalize the work of the school staff.

Many teachers and administrators would like to make changes in curriculum and school patterns of living and working, but need the help and support of parents in order to do so. The parents must be drawn into the school setting in order that they might be actively involved in dialogue and mutually supportive programs to improve education. Many parents can and will give worthwhile assistance to the teacher and administrator if properly approached and prepared

for the task at hand.

Parents Serve as Consultants

By surveying the talents and resources of parents, one finds that in any community many parents have interesting hobbies, have traveled extensively, and have special skills they can demonstrate to the children. Parents can be relied upon to supply classes with a wide variety of demonstrations and shared experiences. Well-traveled parents can share valuable experiences, pictures, and souvenirs from the countries where they have traveled or lived. (9:418) They can loan rare books, objects, phonograph records, and motion pictures. They can aid on field trips by serving as chaperones, checking attendance, exercising accident safeguards, and taking part in follow-up activities. They can be members of textbook committees, report card committees, and others dealing with the improvement of teaching.

Parents are usually very cooperative in bringing pets or other animals to school. This enables many children to have firsthand experiences with animals which is more beneficial to them than merely reading about them or seeing pictures of them.

The Portland, Oregon schools, since 1967, have been making neighborhood surveys in order to identify adult talent. The community survey was started by Alameda grade school teacher Jim O'Neill. O'Neill and about seventy eighth graders spent two weeks canvasing their entire neighborhood of

1,400 homes. They told about their social studies course and asked each resident to fill out a questionaire designating his line of work or special hobby field. Students asked that the forms be mailed back to the school, indicating whether or not the resident would be willing to talk with the class when students were studying in the area of his specialty. (3)

The result in Portland was highly favorable and today when students are studying business, for example, bankers, businessmen and industrialists come to talk with them. Some of the people who came to talk with the youngsters about a specialty field have stayed, and now find themselves involved in parent groups and fund raising drives to provide special equipment and teaching materials for schools in Portland. (3)

Denison, Texas, school officials decided to ask parents to volunteer to speak to classes about their jobs and professional occupations. Almost immediately they were swamped with offers from parents who wished to participate. Topics ranged from pearl culture to dentistry. (7:14)

A seven-year-old girl at Memorial Grade School in McMinneille, Oregon, was the envy of the whole school when she arrived for classes one day. Although her school is only two blocks from home, her father brought her by helicopter. A commercial helicopter pilot, he had been asked to speak to his daughter's second grade class about his job and decided to illustrate his lecture. (7:15)

Parents Serve as Volunteer Teacher Aides

In the Moreland School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, mothers are allowed to work in the school during school hours. The project is designed to free teachers and the clerical staff from routine jobs. (2)

Parents sign up for the program on a semester basis. They indicate the days and hours they can work at school, along with job preferences. They can choose from such categories as typing, helping teachers in the classroom, working with audio-visual materials, grading papers, or assisting with library groups. They are encouraged to select more than one activity. Teachers, specialists, and clerks who want assistance send written requests to the office daily. Their requests are then matched to the volunteers' preferences. (2)

According to Wilhelmine R. Nielsen, principal, Garden Road School, Poway, California the preparation of instructional materials is an area in which any parent, regardless of his talents and abilities, can contribute to the school program. At Garden Road School every Wednesday some five to twenty mothers and grandmothers spend their morning at school making materials for use by teachers and children. They make a variety of items from book covers to games. Prior to the Wednesday morning session, the teachers prepare samples of what they wish the parents to make. Necessary materials are assembled so that when the mothers arrive no time is wasted in finding materials. (9)

Ideally, various combinations of general workshops, on-the-job training, and continuing seminars are needed if real success, mutual satisfaction and understanding, and genuine cooperation and benefits are to result for children, parents, teachers, and their aides. (14)

Parents Serve as Substitute Teachers

Parents serving as substitute teachers can either be a great asset to school-community relations or a liability that can cause almost irreparable harm. A substitute teacher is only a part-time teacher. The majority of her time is spent as a mother and, very importantly, as a member of clubs and organizations of women in the community. The substitute teacher that has been improperly informed of her responsibilities toward the school system and pupils that she serves will many times jump to improper conclusions. And, women gossip. A substitute must be reminded that it is of primary importance that she not divulge personal opinions and reactions about what was observed in the teaching setting.

Substitute teachers learn a good deal about the children with whom they work. Many regular teachers will leave information about children which indicates physical, mental, or social problems. Such information as this will be needed by teachers who work with these students. The substitute must understand that this information was disclosed to them in strict confidence. If this information is not kept strictly confidential it can discredit the school system and the

teaching profession.

All the people in a school should assume a mutual responsibility for fostering good relations. Special teachers or consultants should maintain their contacts with the substitute, and attempt to help in every way possible. Good professional relations can go a long way towards winning the support of a substitute and creating in her a desire to promote a proper image of the school among her peers.

People tend to understand each other better, if they have a chance to work together. With this in mind the substitute teachers should be invited to attend the in-service education programs that are held for regular teachers. The programs should help keep the substitute informed about educational matters, as well as provide them with an opportunity to meet and work with the teachers whom they will serve. Good relations usually come through what the substitute teachers learn via first hand contacts. (5)

Parents Aid in Curriculum Planning

Work connected with the study and improvement of the curriculum at all levels afford rich opportunities for parent participation. Parents have taken an active and constructive role in helping teachers define the purposes of education and the objectives for specific fields concerned with the adequacy of the curriculum, revision of course offerings, and introduction of changes that could not be attempted without their support. They have served as resource persons, because

of their specialties, in the preparation of units and have worked with teachers in the selection of materials and equipment for vitalizing the units. Schools in both industrial and agricultural centers have sought their advice for keeping vocational programs in line with prevailing needs and conditions. (4:145-146)

Parents Participate in Extracurricular Activities

Parents enjoy taking part in extracurricular activities with children and adolescent youngsters. Any number possess talents and technical knowledges that can be used advantageously. Some schools call on them to work with teacher-sponsors of clubs in jewelry making, photography, folk dancing, leathercraft, and glass blowing. Mothers are willing to assist pupils and teachers in designing simple costumes for dramatic productions, and fathers gladly lend a hand in building and painting stage scenery. They respond freely to invitations to take part in plays, musicals, assembly programs, and athletic games, to act as judges for contests, and chaperones for parties and dances. (4:146) Such projects can be very effectively directed to fathers and working mothers that are inclined to help but have no free time during the day. A list of volunteers should be kept on file for quick reference.

Parents Participate in Planning the School Plant and Facilities

Parents have made valuable contributions in the planning

of the school plant and its physical facilities. Their advice is good on the selection of plots and the geographical location of buildings. Some school officials consider them indispensable in reviewing plans and in deciding how a plant can best meet the needs of pupils and adult members of the community. They have proven to be far-sighted and courageous in recommending building expenditures that boards of education were afraid to approve. They have been responsible for procuring adequate recreational and playground facilities and essential equipment in cafeterias, health centers, and gymnasiums. Some have undertaken repair of old playground equipment and the construction of pieces which school boards refused to purchase. Parents who take part in activities connected with the plant feel that they are members of the school system. (4:146-147)

The school plant holds much of interest and value for special interest groups. Local chapters of the Garden Clubs of America will provide a supporting public opinion for well-landscaped school sites. Florists can be shown the community value of school gardens and herbariums. It is also possible to interest architects and engineers in good building design and to secure their active support in stimulating better building. (6:530)

In some way, all parents of school age children play an informal role in public school relations. Whether in the home, the neighborhood, or in the school setting the aggregate of these activities can spell doom or success to any

educational program. A school public relations program that fully weighs and considers the informal use of parents in attaining its goals has taken a giant step in the right direction--a step toward insuring success.

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